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GREETINGS
FROM
WILTON CHRISTMAS 1923.



Christmas Greetings

from

Adelaide Nichols



THE PIONEER

Last night I stood at a window in a city so far from my little town that their very names are unknown to one another. Cries in a tongue that I shall never understand broke against my walls; carriages so quaint that they seemed made to laugh and stare at, not to ride soberly in, rumbled below; the lines of winking street lights shone on strange shops and moving crowds to whom I was an undreamed of foreigner.

"All this," my heart cried, "you have journeyed far to see!"

"It has been a weary way," sighed my body, "I have borne patiently with your tugging me from place to place, but I should have been more comfortable at home."

"Ah!" said my heart in jubilant scorn, "How stupid you are! You would have stayed forever where you were shut in by the hills of our little town. But I am a pioneer! At night when you were merely drowsing by the fireside, I used to dream of what lay beyond those hills. So I lead you out across the lap of a mighty continent where the grain that was to nourish the world all winter still covered the earth with a sea of green, whitened into waves by prairie winds—endless—"

"Those were hot days crossing the prairies," said my body, "and I tired of being cramped in a railroad train."

"But I let you go free when we came to the mountains. We climbed to the highest crests."

"Till my knees trembled under me," grumbled my body.

"Till beneath your feet valleys swam through a mist of tumbling waterfalls, and we saw glaciers flung across the saddles of far ranges. Giant pines seemed like the lances of a host of knights mounting the steeps below

us. Only the eagle, drifting through blue bays between the clouds, could poise higher than we poised or see farther than we could see!"

"Yet you were not content," said my body.

"No, for beyond those mountains, lay the Pacific Ocean, with ships flying the flags of the Orient. I saw a Liner with three slanted funnels sail out of the harbor, her black smoke trailing behind her as she faced the west. Could we turn again to our hill-rimmed town when that ship was seeking the Orient?"

"No, you would subject me to those tossing seas. Nothing can stop you," said my body.

"Ah, but to perch on the prow of a mighty ship as it ploughs into the night!" cried my heart, exulting. "To hang in the very center of the universe with the greatest deeps of ocean below you and the farthest star above, and the horizon lost in the remotest regions of the dark! The crackle of white-lipped waves breaks against the ship's side far below you, and above you the mast, like the pole of a mighty tent, upholds the star-frosted canopy of the sky."

"Do you forget how cold and stiff I grew perching on that prow till midnight?" asked my body plaintively.

"But you were happy on that morning when we awoke and found ourselves in a long-dreamed of harbor," cried my heart to console my body. "The ship was still and seemed to wait in quiet dignity for those eastern shores to bid it draw near. Little, tipping boats with square sails, frail and fantastic as those painted on Japanese screens, flew toward us from the shore and circled round us as if to discover our intentions and fly whispering back with strange tales. Other great steamers,—freighters,—men-of-war, lay waiting in that wide harbor on their way east or west as their purpose held. And beyond, lay the golden line of land with the cone of the Sacred Mountain towering above—far and misty as if some master had painted it upon the pale sky of morning with his tenderest wash of gray."

"Yes, I was glad when we came to land," admitted my body.

"The enchanted land of the East!" cried my heart, "where we found, as I had dreamed, cities of paper houses, streets of shops where swarmed black-haired and slant-eyed folk clad in kimonos, the crisp shuffling sound of wooden sandals, the padding trot of rickshaw coolies, the bobbing and bowing of friends who embowered with a hundred courtesies a chance meeting in a crowded street,—the black eyes of little babies and their funny triangular smiles,—all the keen color and leisurely confusion of Oriental streets."

"They were muddy streets when it rained," said my body, "and very dusty when it was dry. And there were evil smells."

"Ah, but we went out of the city into the green hills with the rice-fields clinging about their feet and clambering to their very knees,—crescents and wedges of waving rice on every ledge of the hills. Where two rice-fields met, there were eddies of crimson lilies,—and along the road twisted and tufted pine trees,—and always within sight, the green-blue sea."

"Yes," sighed my body, "all these things I have seen, heard, and felt."

"And tonight," said my heart in a loud, brave voice that drowned the alien cries without, "you are farther from home than you have ever been before. You shall sleep in a city which the mere holiday tourist does not seek."

"Then, let us sleep," yawned my body.

"Yes," said my heart, well content to have journeyed so far. "Let us sleep. Tomorrow will be time enough to learn new lessons and discover strange things."

Then my body lay down in a city we had traveled over half the world to reach, a city so far from my little town that they did not even dream of each other's names. And though my body complained that the bed on which it lay was not so soft and smooth as the bed it had left

at home and though it fretted a little that alien cries in the street without, disturbed its rest, my heart hushed it, saying that pioneers must not look backward and that it was glorious and adventurous to have come so far beyond the hills that shut in our little town. So at last my body slept.

Then my heart, set free in dreams to wander where it would, went its way unhampered by my body. And, strange to tell, it did not go to the crests of mountains where glaciers were flung, nor did it sail under star-frosted skies, nor walk through streets where Oriental colors thronged, nor revisit the rice-fields and red lilies. My heart looked through a little window that it had looked through many times before. And through the window, it glimpsed a blaze of orange and crimson that seemed to flood the world with light. "Sunset!" cried out my heart.

Then it knelt at that little window and looked forth. And lo! it was not sunset that made the world blaze with gold, but the hills that hem in my little town. For it was October, and though in all the Oriental lands through which we had come, we had caught no hint of the color of autumn but had, by chance, just missed the miracle at every place, here on these well-loved hills, the woods were like leaping flames of amber and crimson. A maple tree very near the window had turned clear gold with a flush of crimson all along one side as though a flame had brushed it there. On the ground beneath, was a carpet of fallen leaves that stirred and brightened as the sun and wind played over them. The keenness of color ran into my heart like a sword, and with the pain of that sharp beauty, it suddenly began to weep. The eager pioneer wept and wept with sheer joy in the marvel of the October hills that hemmed in a little town on the other side of the world.

Meanwhile my body, weary with the long journey that my heart had set it, slept soundly in an alien city and knew not where my pioneering heart wandered when it was left free in dreams.

Habin, Manchuria, 1922